Note by LMB: This interview by Debbie Yutko was done in support of my Writer Guest of Honor stint for Dragon*Con in Atlanta, in September of 2009. An abridged version appeared in the convention newssheet *The Daily Dragon*, and the full version on-line at: http://dailydragon.dragoncon.org/2009/lois-mcmaster-bujold/

Widely acclaimed author **Lois McMaster Bujold**, winner of multiple awards including five Hugos and three Nebulas is attending her first Dragon*Con in many years. Famous for her Vorkosigan science fiction saga, Ms. Bujold has proven herself equally adept at fantasy with her Chalion books and her Sharing Knife tetrology. Not only is she one of the few authors who have won both a Hugo and a Nebula simultaneously, she has done it twice, once for her novella, "The Mountains of Mourning," a Miles Vorkosigan tale, and again for her fantasy novel, *Paladin of Souls*, the second installment in her Chalion series. Her stories have been translated into over 20 different languages and have won numerous other awards. Ms. Bujold graciously agreed to answer a few questions for the *Daily Dragon*.

Daily Dragon (DD): *When you wrote* Shards of Honor *and* The Warrior's Apprentice*, you were entering the male-dominated genre of military SF. What effect do you think this has had on your work?*

Lois McMaster Bujold (LMB): Well, it was likely a much more advantageous start point for my career at the time than if they'd been classified as Romance or Young Adult, both arenas in which women writers were consistently dismissed. In fact, only a very few of my books can be classified as military SF (or military fantasy). Miles is army-mad; I am not. Note that I followed those two books up with *Ethan of Athos* and *Falling Free*, neither of which were military, but both of which were good general SF. *Falling Free* won my first Nebula Award in part, I think, from the exposure it garnered through its appearance as a four-part serial in *Analog Magazine,* which reached a core audience of science-and-engineering oriented SF readers. Who aren't always male, I must point out.

Jim Baen, my then-publisher, was of course very enthusiastic about mil SF, and tried to steer my career in that direction for a while, once even introducing me, more hopefully than truthfully I fear, as "the new Gordy Dickson." But when I went off in different directions (several of them), he supported my books all the same.

DD: *As you began the Vorkosigan saga, you visualized a series of stand-alone books similar to the Horatio Hornblower stories by C.S. Forester. Unlike the standard military protagonist, however, Miles*

doesn't steadily ascend in rank as the novels progress. Why did you decide to deviate from this trope, and what consequences did it have on your development of Miles's character arc?

LMB: Well, the series isn't really military SF, which I define as SF dedicated to exploring military milieus; the series is about Miles and his universe, and is dedicated to exploring his life and whatever interesting comes up in it. It gives me a much wider scope for plots and situations. Miles is, after all, all about deviating from the tropes.

It also frees me from having to constantly come up with More and Bigger, as each book follows the next, leading to a kind of E. E. "Doc" Smith authorial arms-race, where one starts by blowing up cities and ends by blowing up galaxies, with no net gain in story. (The actual fannish demand, I have decided, is "Each book better than all the others!") Instead, I can come up with Other, or Subtler, or even Now For Something Completely Different, without giving up both the sales and the artistic advantages of series work. (And the artistic advantages are fierce and fascinating. You can do things with series, both in building complexity and character and in self-critiquing, that you just can't do in a single novel.)

DD: *Placing a physically impaired son of a famous military leader in a society that shuns physical disabilities as deformities is one of the best examples I have seen of putting a protagonist through hell. What influenced your creation of Miles and Barrayar?*

LMB: The setting grew organically. My method has been described as "just-in-time worldbuilding"; in general, I don't make up settings until a story passes through them, and then I assemble them as needed around my plot and characters. (This makes "universe sharing" very difficult for me.)

The Vorkosiverse had a foreshadowing in a novelette titled "Dreamweaver's Dilemma" which I wrote way back in late 1982, before I began what became my first novel *Shards of Honor.* It was an SF mystery set on a future Earth, but in it the planet of Beta Colony first appeared as backstory for one of the characters. The story didn't sell at the time, but I recycled Beta as a pre-fab homeworld for Cordelia (set further down the timeline) when I wrote the opening chapter of *Shards*. The setting of Barrayar began with Cordelia Naismith's first sight of Aral Vorkosigan's boots in the mud; his world was built outward around him, to explain who and what he was. (In that sense, he really *is* the father of his country.) I realized very early on, when I was still writing *Shards*, that the pair would have a bright, physically handicapped son, very difficult in Barrayar's context; it was

the first thing I knew about Miles, before I knew anything else. He and his world would be challenges for each other.

The first scene I ever saw in my mind for what became *The Warrior's Apprentice* was the death of Miles's bodyguard and mentor Sergeant Bothari, a complex and ambiguous character first developed in *Shards*, defending a teen Miles on some shuttleport tarmac far from home. The book was written around that seed crystal, although by the time I started at the beginning and finally arrived back at that center, much had changed or been added. Miles's greatest personal challenges that he had to overcome in that book were not actually his physical ones, but his mental ones; his besetting sins of pride, imprudence, and despair. (I almost typo'd "impudence" there, but that's more a feature than a bug for Miles.)

DD: *Your work has often touched on the role of women in society. As birth control has freed women from unwanted pregnancy, your idea of a uterine replicator would free them from pregnancy itself. Do you have any thoughts on other scientific or social advances that might affect the role of women in the future?*

LMB: Pretty much all social and scientific advances will affect the roles of both men and women in the future. I suppose the question really is, what advances will affect women *differently* (or at least differentially) than they affect men. A heart transplant is gender-neutral; vehicle power steering creates a parity that didn't exist before. Sometimes the latter parity is still artificially thwarted by design choices (such as heavy equipment that still requires upper-body strength), but even that is falling by the wayside as design gets smarter. Inventions like DNA testing completely blow away the underlying reason for forms of marriage that attempt to assure paternity by controlling the behavior of the women, a pretty deep bio-social pattern; this inevitably affects both women and men. How will the old biological impulses, in both genders, come to terms with the new reason? I think we're already seeing shifts in social patterns on this score.

Men and women–I am increasingly aware–also age somewhat differently, although I'm not sure either side has an overall advantage. Not sure yet what will happen there.

I really do think modern technology, including but not limited to reproductive technologies, is the whole root of women's liberation as we (in richer cultures) currently enjoy it. It isn't because we all just decided to become better people. Extending that advantage to more

women world-wide is certainly a change that is happening, and I hope will continue to happen.

DD: *Although you write science fiction and fantasy, you seamlessly blend in other genres. Your recent bestseller,* The Hallowed Hunt*, contains fantasy, sword-and-sorcery, mystery, and romance. What are your thoughts on genre labeling and the implied stigmas genres often carry?*

LMB: I am not impressed with "reading for status," though I suppose it's inevitable; people do *everything* for status, some of it quite bizarre. Besides the usual scramble for a higher place in the virtual pecking order on the part of readers, there is also an underlying competition for audience and sales on the part of writers and publishers, which can get quite tense. I also think a certain amount of the unnecessary bafflegab from the big-L Literature side stems from college lit departments who have to compete with, say, engineering, medicine, and accounting for funding. They have to at least *sound* important, or risk having their money and staff cut. Never underestimate the role of economic jealousy in literary criticism.

More positively, people have a right to their tastes, and a real need of efficient ways to sort through the avalanche of books being published for material to satisfy those tastes. Genre labels are good when they work as doors, only bad when they become walls.

On the opposite end of the scale from "reading for status" or "books as tools for social engineering" (i.e., political propaganda), is the very common use of fiction by readers as a mood-altering drug, which certainly beats most other kinds of self-medication (alcohol, street drugs, cutting) in terms of safety and efficacy. Plus, you might learn things. But I don't think anyone can figure out how to shelve books by mood.

Some years back, I read an interview with a forensic pathologist who made the remark that he'd never walked into a bad crime scene, the kind with blood on the walls, in a house with a lot of books. These disasters were all in book-free spaces. Makes sense to me–books give a time-out, a place of temporary escape till one's spirits lift, not available to trapped non-readers. It suggests that genre fiction, which tends very much to be chosen by readers' mood needs, is not so trivial in its social benefits after all.

DD: *What effect do you think the current popularity of fantasy is having on SF, and do you foresee an increasing blend of the two, with less real science and more fantastical gadgets that will likely never exist?*

LMB: We now live in what was for many of us the future, daily; I do think I can find more sense-of-wonder on the Internet–the NASA website, for heaven's sake!–than in a lot of written SF. It's a major challenge to top reality. Increasingly, I suspect the SF genre has retreated from trying to purvey real sense-of-wonder, not to mention excitement about the new future, science, or technology, into just delivering social critique and fear of the future, which is a lot easier but alas much less fun. Dreary, even. (Although I expect it will be interesting to future historians as a guide to the social emotions of our time. Near-future dystopias have a tendency to turn into bemusing historical artifacts with notable speed.)

Fantasy, meanwhile, still delivers wonder and, at the high end, sometimes even a hint of the numinous, which I feel is the other side of the same coin to the secular sense-of-wonder. The very opposite of dreary.

If SF can again figure out how to purvey wonder and hope, instead of despair, anger, and fear, I think it could surge again. Meanwhile, well… there are lots of other kinds of books to read.

DD: *On your blog, http://profile.myspace.com/loismcmasterbujold, you reported the recent completion of your next Miles book for Baen,* CryoBurn*, set for release in late 2010. What can you tell us about the story now that it's finished?*

LMB: Well, I will be reading from the first chapters here at Dragon*Con, on Sunday at 1 PM (at Hanover C-E in the Hyatt). *CryoBurn* has Miles in his SF-mystery mode, as he is sent as an Imperial Auditor by Emperor Gregor to investigate a situation that has arisen on the planet Kibou-daini that affects Barrayar's interests. Kibou-daini has dedicated its culture and economy increasingly to the cryonic preservation of the dead in hopes of their future revival, which is running into understandable demographic problems over time. Miles being Miles, that is only the start-point to his tangle. The tale is told from three viewpoints: Miles, his assistant Armsman Roic, and a local boy named Jin Sato. Miles is age 39 in this one, by the somewhat Miles-centric series chronology we've been using, so we've jumped forward six or seven years since we last saw him in *Diplomatic Immunity*.

DD: *Also on your blog, you've stated that you recently acquired an interest in Japanese Anime and Manga. In what ways do you think*

they differ from American animation and comics, and what aspects intrigue you most?

LMB: I first encountered anime at SF convention movie rooms in the mid-1980s, as personally-owned videotapes, sometimes with translations supplied verbally on the fly by their fannish purveyors. I dipped into it a little in the '90s, but video stores didn't have much selection and I didn't have much time. My Netflix subscription a couple of years ago suddenly opened up the medium for me, and I plunged in more or less at random. I'm now much more "up" on the watching protocols than in my first baffled wonder, though still hardly an expert.

I've barely scratched manga, so far, but one thing that jumps out from both media is the much greater *variety* of stories they seem to offer than American cartoons and comics. With respect to manga, this seems to be because the artists own and sell their own material to publishers the way fiction writers do, rather than the narrow "work-for-hire" for a few companies that was (prior to webcomics) common in the American market. Manga, being cheaper to produce than anime, also has a lower sales bar to clear to break even, allowing it to access more niche stories and audiences, and creating yet more variety.

I hadn't paid much attention to comics till recently. I'd outgrown *Donald Duck* by age nine, superheroes didn't speak to me, and I was actively repulsed by what seemed to me the ugly, angry counter-culture comics I first encountered in my college years. (Except for *Fat Freddy's Cat,* natch. I still have my copy…) And superheroes seemed to be all there was. Then a friend pressed *Sandman* onto me, and a bit later I encountered Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, and I began to be more aware.

I actually now have some graphic media street cred of my own: the comics company Soliel, in France, is producing a graphic novel adaptation of *The Warrior's Apprentice*, in three volumes. The first volume will be out this fall. I've seen a bit of the first part previewed in the comics magazine *Lanfeust*–drawn with a French accent, I swear. Slightly blurry peek here: http://www.lekiosque.fr/Lanfeust-Magazine-numero-121-Vorkosigan-en-BD-online-l236557.aspx (Click on the side arrows to turn the pages.) French and European comics, I discover, have yet another whole style-and-culture tradition and history apart from either American or Japanese. I will be carting around my sample of the first installment at times this weekend, to show off to the interested.

DD: *I've heard that you're a fan of the original Star Trek series. What do you think of the new Star Trek movie and how it incorporated the idea of parallel universes to update the story?*

LMB: I haven't seen it yet, alas. In general, I'm not too fond of either time travel (with or without paradoxes) or parallel universes in stories which are not dedicated specifically to exploring those tropes, because it invites too much emotional cheating. But I will certainly get around to seeing the film eventually anyway, if only for old times' sake.

DD: *Has there been any interest in basing a movie on your writing? What are your thoughts about giving up control over a story and characters in the way producers and directors usually demand?*

LMB: The last serious nibble was quite a while ago. I did sell rights to an early short story to the TV anthology *Tales From The Darkside*, years back. The episode as produced had no discernable relation to my tale.

I think the Miles books would actually be harder to transfer to the visual media than people guess at first, because so much of the humor is inside Miles's mind, in the contrast between what's going on and what he's really thinking, and in the "voice" of the books. This exploits a strength of written media–style, and giving direct access to characters' minds–that the visual media must approach in more roundabout ways. Miles lives on a narrow boundary between trope and critique-of-trope, and the least wobble risks losing what's essentially interesting about him.

…Although I think someone like the *Eureka* guys might have a chance of getting the tone right. I actually think the Miles tales would lend themselves better to the small screen than the large, miniseries or series rather than feature film. More witty script, less big special effects that have to justify their expense by taking screen time away from the actual story.

I am very divided in mind about the giving up control–which I would have to do; I am ***so*** not a movie person. It's true that the books would continue to exist apart from the visual interpretation; I suppose I'd rather see something done well that departs from the original than something done badly, regardless of fidelity. The worst of both worlds would be something both unfaithful *and* dreadful.

Though Miles gets most of the attention, I do think some of my so-called "lesser," simpler, stand-alone books would actually make better feature films, because there are fewer of those novelistic strengths to be lost in translation. I think *Falling Free* would be wonderful adapted to animation or anime, dodging around the

extreme special-effects challenge of portraying the zero-G-living, four-armed quaddies in live-action. And *The Spirit Ring*, with its fiery animated statue striding through the climax, just cries out for some spiritual descendant of Ray Harryhausen.

DD: *Tell us about your next project.*

LMB: Just at present, I am on a long-overdue break, dividing my time between general cultural filter-feeding and unwelcome adventures in dentistry that blew out about half my summer, and its budget. Happily, watching fossil television on DVDs goes well with recovering from root canals, multi-tasking of a sort. After that, I don't know. I have a lot of old ideas sitting on my mental shelf, slowing aging; I think I want something new. But I don't know what that is yet.

There is lots more meta-talk from me, by the way, on my fan-run website www.dendarii.com in the "Essays" and "Interviews" sections–although I'd rather folks just read my books.